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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000019

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: ELECTION SITREP 3: DESPITE REPRESSION, REGIONAL  
OPPOSITION CAMPAIGNS CONTINUE

REF: A. MINSK 010

[1](#)B. 06 MINSK 1273

Classified By: Classified By Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Despite omnipresent surveillance by GOB agents and state media, the opposition political party leaders and independent media candidly discussed the politically repressive conditions in which they are conducting their local election campaigns in the run up to local elections on January 14. As the candidates begin their last week of campaigning, the opposition remains divided on the question of boycotting the elections. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) This cable includes information from Charge's travel to Beloozersk/Beryoza, Brest Region, and Grodno on December 22 and January 4, respectively, and information from Acting Pol/Econ Chief's visit to Borisov, Minsk Region, on December [1](#)26.

Candidate Registration

[1](#)3. (C) Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) representatives Dmitriy Tretyak and Tamara Shchepetkina told Charge that all eight opposition initiative groups and their candidates for the Beloozersk City Council were registered after gathering over 300 signatures and enjoy significant support among the population. Borisov City Election Commission Chair Nikolay Zelenkevich observed that authorities registered 60 percent of those who applied for candidacy and that 38 candidates were running in 34 districts. Similarly, Grodno City Election Commission Chair Vladimir Khlyabich reported the registration of 55 of 81 potential candidates. However, in each community, Grodno and Borisov, only four opposition candidates were registered.

...And Intimidation

[1](#)4. (C) According to Beloozersk, Borisov, and Grodno opposition and civil society activists, fear pervades Belarusian society as local authorities use the one-year contract employment system and other economic threats to subdue GOB opponents. All opposition candidates experience threats of job loss and pressure on their spouses, children, and parents by the BKGB and other government agencies. According to Tretyak and Borisov opposition United Civic Party (UCP) Head Lev Margolin, authorities frequently disperse opposition meetings in privately-owned residences and deny opposition activists use of public conference rooms.  
(Note: During the trips to Beloozersk and Borisov,

opposition leaders were forced to change the venue of their meetings with Charge and Acting Pol/Econ Chief because of authorities' "safety concerns." End note.) Due to GOB harassment, mass rallies remain extremely difficult to organize.

#### Access to State Radio

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15. (C) Candidates in Beloozersk were allotted radio spots, as mandated by Belarus Election Code, but only two-minute spots that played at non-peak listening hours of 0500 and 0600 (ref A). Opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) candidate Sergey Antusevich told Charge that he had refused to record a five-minute spot after Grodno authorities also scheduled similar early morning broadcasts. Unsurprising, Borisov City Election Commission Chair Nikolay Zelenkevich claimed that authorities in Borisov offered all registered candidates five-minute spots but no opposition candidates had "taken advantage" of the opportunity.

#### Mistreatment by State Media

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16. (C) According to opposition representatives in all three communities, state media often belittle the opposition candidates and refuse to publish their platforms. Echoing similar complaints heard in Borisov, Belarusian Helsinki Committee representative Roman Yurgel showed Charge several local state-controlled newspapers in Grodno that placed the names of the regime's candidates prominently on the front page as part of holiday announcements. UCP Political Council member and opposition entrepreneur association head Viktor Gorbachev complained that state-controlled Borisov newspapers scattered opposition candidates' names, with inaccurate

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biographical information, out of alphabetical order among names and biographies of pro-GOB candidates.

#### Repression of Independent Newspapers

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17. (C) In Beloozersk, Shchepetkina described widespread repression of independent media by the authorities and noted that authorities no longer permit her independent newspaper "Gazeta dlya Vas" to be distributed via state kiosks and postal service, decreasing subscriptions from 20,000 to 3,000. Although her paper is still registered, authorities issue warnings to people who are observed possessing copies. Anatoliy Bukas, the Editor-in-Chief of Borisov's only remaining independent newspaper "Borisovskie Novosti," told Acting Pol/Econ Chief that his paper's subscriptions have plummeted from 19,000 to below 7,000 also because of exclusion from the state post and kiosks and described other forms of economic repression, such as restrictions on advertisements and subscriptions and special punitive tax rates for independent newspapers. (Note: Grodno opposition leaders could not complain about repression of independent newspapers since there are no independent newspapers published in Grodno. End note.)

#### Censorship of Opposition Campaign Materials

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18. (C) Opposition activists in all three communities reported GOB censorship and/or confiscation of printed campaign materials. Such repression is particularly acute in Grodno, where opposition Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" (BSDP) city council candidate Vladimir Kiselevich reported that authorities threatened to confiscate campaign leaflets which discussed the politically motivated imprisonment and recent hunger strike by BSDP leader and former opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. Grodno Regional United Civic Party (UCP) Head and council candidate Yuriy Istomin showed Charge an elaborate, four-page

synopsis of the UCP plan for Grodno's economic development that authorities pressured him to reduce to a single page leaflet. UCP Grodno City Chair and City Council candidate Dmitriy Slutskiy described similar censorship by city election authorities.

To Boycott or Not To Boycott?

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¶9. (C) Despite the repression and the withdrawal of 11 opposition Belarusian Party of Communists in Brest region, the Beloozersk BPF activists with whom Charge spoke still view local campaigns as the best avenue by which to engage voters in a dialogue about Belarus' future and did not appear to support a boycott. Similarly, in Grodno, Antusevich and even Kiselevich, in spite of Kozulin's recent endorsement of a boycott, pledged to see their races through to the end. However, the Borisov opposition leadership did not signal any change of plan since Gorbachev related to Ambassador his plans to stage a boycott during the final week of the election (ref B).

Comment

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¶10. (C) There were clear common threads in each visit - not just the consistent appearance of the Embassy's BKGB handler - and the trips to Beloozersk, Borisov, and Grodno were simultaneously disheartening and inspiring. The GOB's treatment of pro-democracy activists is no less repressive than during the March 2006 presidential elections and, to a large extent, is generating momentum for boycotting elections, which everyone in the oppositions regard as a farce. However, opposition activists remain undeterred and determined to use these elections to communicate with the Belarusian people.  
Moore